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The limitations of words.

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Review: Time of the Magicians by Wolfram Eilenberger.

“Time of the Magicians” is a great book about philosophy and language. Sort of easy to read, and sort of easily understood…almost…

In “Time of the Magicians” (2018) Eilenberger traces the lives and ideas of Ludwig Wittgenstein, Walter Benjamin, Ernst Cassirer, and Martin Heidegger between 1919 and 1929.
Eilenberger argues that all four philosophers agreed that human existence is fundamentally bound to language…!?
Instead of viewing words as simple labels attached to pre-existing objects, Eilenberger tells us that they saw language is actively shaping how humans experience reality and understand themselves (III, language. 1919–20).
Indeed, it is all about words… And then we are off to the races…

Eilenberger starts with Wittgenstein. For Wittgenstein Language sets the strict boundaries of logic and thought. What can be said clearly can be known; everything else (ethics, God, the meaning of life) lies beyond words…

Eilenberger tell us that: Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (1921) is a direct Latin homage to Baruch Spinoza’s *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* (1670), a title suggested to Wittgenstein by the philosopher G.E. Moore. Both books share a

radical goal of intellectual liberation through strict logical precision.
According to Wittgenstein, traditional philosophy is misunderstanding how language works. To Wittgenstein, most philosophical questions are not false, but rather nonsensical. It follows that humans should recognize the exact boundary of what can be said, allowing us to stop chasing impossible answers and live ethically in the world (IV, education. 1922–23).
So far, so good.. Reasonable..

Words have limitations, and we live inside limitations defined by the words we (can) use:
Eilenberger tells us about Wittgensteins spelling dictionary (*Wörterbuch für Volksschulen*) for peasant children using roughly 3,000 everyday local words. I.e. Wittgenstein realized that language is not an abstract logical mirror, but a practical tool deeply bound to a community's specific "*form of life*". The phrase "Tell me your 3,000 words, and I will tell you who you are" captures his insight that an individual's active vocabulary shapes their daily reality, world-view, and identity (VI, Freedom).

Next, Eilenberger weaves Aby Warburg (German art historian who founded the Warburg Library for Cultural Studies in Hamburg) into the book. I.e. Warburg believed humans do not encounter reality directly.
Humans invent symbols, myths, and words to tame their primordial fear of a chaotic universe, yet those very forces constantly threaten to break back through and overwhelm us. By naming and picturing the threat, humans carved out a safe mental distance between themselves and the raw violence of nature.
Contrary to optimistic thinkers that would tell us that we have permanently conquered superstition, Warburg warned that it modern media etc. can easily destroy our protective "*thought-space*" by flooding us with instant, raw shocks. Myth and irrationality are never truly dead — they are merely sleeping beneath the floorboards of culture (V. 1923–25).
Indeed. Words doesnt make everything safe...

Perhaps we should recognize that words are, and can be, dangerous...
Meybe it should be allowed to see words as pointing to a deeper world beyond the surface...
Eilenberger let Walter Benjamin explain:
I.e. in Kants 1781 masterpiece "*Kritik der Reinen Vernunft*", Critique of Pure

Reason, Immanuel Kant wanted to rescue human knowledge from both blind superstition and total skepticism:
Kant argued that humans can never know things as they truly are in themselves (das Ding an sich). We can only know how things appear to us through our built-in mental filters of space, time, and cause-and-effect.
Eilenberger explains that Benjamin saw Kant's model of experience as completely bloodless and mechanical — like a dry physics experiment. Kant reduced "experience" to what a detached, mathematical observer can measure.
According to Benjamin, shrinking human truth down to mere scientific facts left modern people spiritually starved. When philosophy refuses to take deeper, non-scientific experiences seriously, human beings become alienated from the world, from language, and from meaning itself.
Eilenberger let Benjamin tell us that Humans and philosophy should stop treating words like mathematical labels and started listening to their deeper, poetic, and theological resonance, humanity could recover a richer, fuller way of knowing the world (VI, Freedom. 1925–27).

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Eilenbergen next moves on to Heidegger.
And the realization, that indeed, it is a dangerous world out there…
For Heidegger, crisis and anxiety are not mere psychological problems to be medicated away. Instead, they are vital wake-up calls that pull us out of shallow, unthinking conformity and force us to take responsibility for our own authentic existence.
When something goes wrong — a profound crisis, deep boredom, anxiety (Angst), grief, or even a broken tool that interrupts your routine — your smooth connection to the world snaps. Everything feels strange, empty, or disconnected. This is when the urgent, existential question erupts: "Why am I even here?"

So, for a generation, a world, shattered by war and economic collapse that their feelings of disorientation, dread, and homelessness were actually the starting point of true philosophy (VI, Freedom. 1925–27).

Where death is the ultimate "breakdown" that shatters our everyday autopilot and forces us to ask, "*Why am I here*"?
In daily life, society treats death like a distant news item or a medical event that happens to other people ("one dies eventually, just not today"). So, facing death is the only way to live an authentic (eigentlich) life. When you live as though you have infinite time, you let society make your choices for you. When you accept that your time is limited, every choice matters because choosing one path means sacrificing others (VI, Freedom).

… And, where should we go from here?
Wolfram Eilenberger then takes us to a famous 1929 debate in Davos, Switzerland between Martin Heidegger and Ernst Cassirer.
Is human consciousness fundamentally built to transcend itself into universal truth, or is our mortality — the absolute bedrock of who we are?
Can humans through symbolic forms (language, art, science, ethics) build an objective, timeless world of culture that outlives any individual (Cassirer). Or are humans just prisoners of time and death with no eternal "outside" or higher realm of truth to escape into?
Well, according to Heidegger, philosophers should strip away comforting cultural illusions so we face our raw, finite existence with courage and honesty.
Without a "why" or a safety net behind it. Humans are not the proud creators of meaning; we are finite beings exposed to the raw mystery of Being…

All in all, in Eilenberger narrative the story goes something like this:
Wittgenstein had already drawn a hard limit around what language can say, Benjamin mourned the loss of divine truth, what we can talk about, Cassirer tried to save human freedom through symbols, and Heidegger declared that we must learn to live bravely inside our absolute limits (VIII, Time. 1929).

With Heidegger it all becomes somewhat dangerous when he argues that, authentic existence is never abstract or universal, it is always rooted in a specific historical moment, soil, and people. Once you face death and escape the mindless crowd (das Man), you must make a decisive, courageous leap into your

own historical destiny...
Fine, except it is not fine, when Hitler rose to power in 1933, and Heidegger mistook the Nazi revolution for that exact moment of national awakening and authentic “resoluteness”...

Eilenberger explains it in the context of Heidegger’s secret love affair with Hannah Arendt (who is jewish): Where Arendt observed that Heidegger did not simply have a “bad character” — rather, he had “no character whatsoever”. Because he lived entirely in abstract thoughts of “*Being*” and lacked common-sense moral grounding, he was easily seduced by political power and grand illusions.
Well, well, is that really a good excuse...?

In the end Eilenberger conclude that great philosophy is not born in comfortable, stable times — it emerges out of rupture and loss of meaning. Rather than retreating into despair when old institutions and certainties crumble, the 1920s “*magicians*” show that periods of upheaval are precisely when we must re-examine our most basic assumptions and imagine new ways of living together.

Words are not just words. A human life is formed with the help of language. Indeed, our words define the limits of our world.
So, whats next in 21st century ? Are we about to let machine-produced text define us.

Will the machines produce words that will imprison us, or do they open up new worlds?
Kind of important what the machines tell us if we still believe that language is at the center of what it is all about...

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